

# THE WORSHIPER

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"YOU'LL grow so tired of hearing about the Brass Cow that I don't believe you will stay long at Mrs. Pelham's. Hush—there she is now!"

The high box hedge prevented them from seeing the speaker, but an insistent voice was calling:

"Wait, Mannie! You've forgotten your rubbers and umbrella. Yes, I know it isn't raining, but there's a heavy cloud in the southeast."

"I didn't know there was a small boy," whispered Elizabeth.

Fanny Grant dimpled with suppressed mirth.

"Behold the little man!"

They had reached the gate, and Elizabeth caught a glimpse of a tall young fellow with a clear-cut chin, humorous gray eyes, and a kindly mouth.

"Don't come home if there's a storm; I'll send your luncheon."

"So that any hostile bolt of lightning can strike Eph instead of me? That would be much better."

"Certainly it would," assented his mother in all gravity. "Why, Fanny, is that you fumbling at the gate? It shows how long it is since you've been here. And this must be Miss Johnstone? I am delighted to have you with me. Let me introduce my son."

Something intangible in the way in which the little ceremony was performed made it seem as if it were a presentation at court. Elizabeth felt as if she were expected to curtsy backward, and was conscious that there was a mere quill on her hat instead of the prescribed ostrich-tips.

"Elizabeth has had a disagreeable trip. May she go straight to her room for repairs?" asked Fanny.

All hospitable regret that the girls had

already breakfasted, Mrs. Pelham started with them toward the house. As they reached the steps she stopped with an exclamation:

"If I didn't forget his rose! Your coming just then put it out of my mind. Brooke! Oh, Brooke!"

Her son turned back at the call, and Mrs. Pelham hurried down the walk, picking a bud by the way. As the girls watched her pin it to the lapel of his coat, Fanny exploded:

"Isn't it just like her to leave you standing on the threshold while she runs back to pin on that idiotic flower? Why, my child, if you had taken poison and she was rushing with the antidote, she would pause to cut the pages of the *Idol's* magazine!"

In the months that followed, Elizabeth Johnstone learned that Fanny's declaration was less extravagant than it sounded. There were times when Mrs. Pelham's immaculate home, attractive table, and the nominal price of board, hardly compensated for the atmosphere of incense. When Elizabeth had accepted a position in the graded school, she had written to ask Fanny Grant, an old schoolmate, to find a place for her to board. Brooke Pelham was frequently away on legal business, so it was necessary to have some one in the house with his mother during his absence. Mary Fenwick, who was the music-teacher at Elizabeth's school, had tried it the year before, but she had given up in despair.

"It got on my nerves," she explained to Elizabeth. "Why, once I chanced to ask for the back of a chicken, and you should have heard how reproachfully Mrs. Pelham said, 'That is Brooke's favorite part!' I can say his virtues forward and backward, as children learn to count."

"You should have cultivated cards instead of conversation," returned Elizabeth lightly. "Mrs. Pelham has the instinct for games, and we play five hundred, or whist, when Mr. Pelham brings in a fourth, and really have had pleasant evenings all winter."

"I suppose Mr. Pelham is called upon to settle any disputed point?" continued the other. "His opinion is the last court of appeal. One day last winter the book-club met with me, and we were discussing which was the greatest English novel. Just then Mr. Pelham came up the steps, and his mother called out: 'Oh, here's Brooke! He can tell you which one *is*.' He must have felt like a goose, for Fanny Grant was there."

"Is he in love with her?"

"He was. They corresponded while he was at the university and the law-school, but quarreled soon after he came home. Fanny told him that she would marry him if he would promise that his mother should never live with them, and he declared that he would die a bachelor rather than shelve his mother upon strangers; so there it ended."

"I suppose that is why Fanny never loses an opportunity of ridiculing him?" suggested Elizabeth.

"Probably," Mary Fenwick replied. "She used to call him the Golden Calf. A little cousin of hers heard her, went to Mrs. Pelham's, and politely asked: 'May I see your Brass Cow?' The nickname has clung to him ever since. I wonder if he minds it!"

The question was indirectly answered one evening at tea, when Mrs. Pelham asked:

"Aren't you going to eat any chocolate-cake, Mannie?"

Elizabeth caught the mute appeal of his glance.

"I didn't mean to say it," added his mother contritely. "Brooke is the queerest fellow about pet names, Miss Johnstone. When he was little, I used to call him Brookie, because his name seemed so short and sharp. The boys changed it to Brooklet; and one terrible day I was driving by the schoolhouse, and there was my poor child with his nose as big as a beet, and Will Strudwick with his eye like a damson-plum—I was glad of that!—because Will had made up some

silly rime about a pet streamlet, and Brooke had fought him for it. So I never called him Brookie again, for fear it would expose him to the temptation of fighting."

"But as I've never had a bruised nose because of Mannie, I guess mother will call me that until I am a graybeard," said her son good-humoredly.

Returning to the more serious matter, Mrs. Pelham repeated:

"Aren't you going to eat any cake, dear? I thought you liked it with chocolate in the batter?"

"So I do, mother; but I don't happen to be hungry to-night."

"Brooke, are you sick? Have you a headache? Have you caught cold? Have you been sitting in a draft?" in an anxious crescendo.

"I'm all right," he hastened to reassure her. "I believe I'll have a small piece of cake, after all."

Mrs. Pelham cut a wedge that a hungry tramp must have acknowledged to be generous. It was so evident that he was eating it because it was a vital concern to his mother and merely a matter of distaste to himself, that Elizabeth Johnstone's sympathy flashed into impetuous speech:

"I used to be sorry for the hen with one chicken; but as I observe more closely, my sympathy all belongs to the one chicken."

The humorous flash in Pelham's gray eyes responded to hers.

## II

AFTER tea, Elizabeth went to her room with a bundle of papers to correct. It was the first warm night of spring; and when she had finished her task she was tempted by the thought of the small porch on the south of the house, embowered in a *Maréchal Niel* rose-vine. It was at the foot of the stairs, and on the opposite side of the house from Mrs. Pelham's bedroom.

As the girl stepped out on the piazza, Pelham arose from the hammock.

"Don't let me startle you," he said. "I have a stupid headache, and chess and cake having failed to cure it, I was lying here in the cool, sweet air. Do you like this rocker?"

"I sha'n't take it, unless you keep on

lying down in the hammock. I only came down for a moment to rest after tussling with the composition-papers. I need it. I read my class a simple account of the Sahara, and I wish you could see the information which is returned to me, from the boy who calls it 'Dessert of Sarah' to the little girl who declares, 'Camels bury their noses in the sand when they want to hide, and their feathers are used on Sunday hats.'"

"Tell me some more," demanded Pelham lazily.

Elizabeth shook her pretty head.

"By no means. That was accidental. Last September, when I began to teach school, I determined that to come to my work every day with fresh zest and interest, I must be a teacher only during school hours. The rest of the time I'm anything else—golf-player, plain-sewing woman, or even a lady of leisure with a new novel and a box of chocolates."

"This is the first time it has occurred to me, but I never have heard you mention the youngsters," reflected Pelham. Then he laughed with sudden remembrance. "That is why you squelched Mrs. Greeley! I was amused the other day when she marched up the front steps and began so belligerently: 'Miss Johnstone, the reason my poor little Bobby missed his spelling to-day—' 'Did Bobby miss his spelling to-day?' you inquired in so *déagé* a manner, lifting your eyes from your book with such innocent unconcern, that before the good lady could recover from your forgetting it, you had gone to let mother know she had a caller."

In spite of his laughing tone, Elizabeth could see that his forehead was wrinkled with pain.

"Let me bring you something I have." She went back to her room and returned with a vial. "I never have headaches; but my sister suffers with them, and she insisted on my bringing this along. Just rub your head with it. Mercy, no! Not that way—you'll get it in your eyes."

"Please!" he begged, holding the bottle toward her.

He looked like a big, helpless boy as he lay there, and she knew that he was unwilling to ask his mother's assistance because her nervous anxiety would be harder to bear than the headache. With

impulsive sympathy, she began with light, soft touches to bathe his hot brow. They were both silent, though once he drew a long breath of relief.

"How good it feels! How cool!"

When she slipped back up-stairs, her clock pointed accusing hands at the lateness of the hour.

The next day she felt ashamed of the good Samaritanism which had seemed so natural and so simple in the rose-trellised porch the night before. When Pelham brought a new book and a box of chocolates "for the lady of leisure," she felt that he was trying to repay her too forward courtesy, and she thanked him charmingly—and carefully avoided a *tête-à-tête*.

During the following fortnight, being a woman, she saw that he laid divers traps for her—to hunt for the first red fruit in the strawberry-bed, to look at the pink-and-white glory of the orchard, or to enjoy the golden fragrance of the Maréchal Niels on the south piazza. It was there that he detained her one morning after breakfast. His mother had been fretting inconsolably at what she declared to be his run-down condition, and had appealed to Miss Johnstone for confirmation.

"I have noticed that Mr. Pelham seems preoccupied," Elizabeth had admitted, and then had blushed because she had observed him closely enough to detect it.

"May I tell you about it?" he asked. "I want your good wishes. Since leaving the bench, Judge Alexander has returned here to practise law. He is one of the best lawyers we have ever had in the State, and to be associated with him would mean everything in my future. He is thinking of taking a junior partner, and Will Strudwick and myself are among those who have applied for the place. I have an appointment with him to-day. Do wish me luck!"

Before she could reply, Mrs. Pelham's voice was heard calling:

"Dearie! Boysie! Oh, there you are!"

As his mother fastened the inevitable rose on his lapel, Elizabeth said:

"England has made the rose seem the symbol of victory."

In the trite words Brooke read her

meaning that she desired his success, and he listened absently to his mother's questions about his physical symptoms. Later on, he regretted that he had not fully allayed her anxiety.

Pelham was seated in Judge Alexander's office, reading in the elder man's courteous and non-committal sentences that his hopes were futile. Brooke was the youngest of the aspirants; and the judge, a man of judicious silence and iron self-control, dreaded the impetuosity and uncertainty of youth.

A knock at the outer door was followed by the hurried entrance of Mrs. Pelham.

"Good morning, judge! Brooke, dear, I went to your office, and was told you were here. I've been so anxious about you. I felt you ought to begin taking your tonic right away, so I drove down to get it."

She produced from a hand-bag a bottle of dark liquid, poured out a tablespoonful, and offered it to her son. He swallowed it without protest, but worse was to follow. From a little jar of preserves she extracted a strawberry.

"Here, darling, eat this to take the taste out. That tonic is so bitter!"

"I don't object to it in the least, mother."

"Yes, you do; you always complain about taking medicine. You surely can't mind eating a strawberry before Judge Alexander—a friend of your father's, who has known you ever since you were born! Brooke is just a baby to us, isn't he, judge? Here, dear, please take the preserves. I can't bear to think of your having that bitter taste in your mouth all this time!"

She extended the fork with its berry; and as Brooke ate it, the judge saw the deep red creep under the tan of his skin. He guessed how intolerably humiliating it was to the young fellow to be treated as a baby before the very person with whom he wished to associate as man to man.

"Good morning, Judge Alexander," said Brooke, his voice pleasant and controlled. "I think we have about finished our conversation, and I'll see mother to her carriage."

Looking from the office-window, the judge saw Brooke helping Mrs. Pelham

into the old-fashioned carriage, standing bareheaded while his mother chatted to him. From her happy and unconscious expression, the judge knew she did not dream how she had mortified her son.

"What would be the use of his telling her?" mused the man, who had known Mrs. Pelham all her life. "She would not understand. She would do the same thing again, but change the kind of preserves. But what dignity, what quiet mastery of himself that boy showed! I might do worse—I might do much worse."

And that was why, to his incredible delight, Brooke Pelham received that afternoon a brief note from the judge formally offering him the position as junior partner.

### III

WHEN Pelham returned home, he was disappointed to find that Elizabeth was not there. He had forgotten it was the evening of the school commencement, while she felt piqued that he had not come back in time to escort her. She determined to punish him; and on her return, when she caught the light of his cigar on the front porch, she came in by the south piazza and went up-stairs to her room.

Her satisfaction at the success of her ruse began to give place to curiosity as to the outcome of his interview with Judge Alexander. Perhaps he had been refused, and was in need of sympathy. It was silly to have avoided him like a sulky child.

Mrs. Pelham tapped at her door.

"I just wanted to be sure you were here. Brooke didn't wish to lock up, and declared you hadn't come in. If you're packing, will you try to make as little noise with your trays as possible? You know Boy's room is right across from yours, and I do want him to get a good night's rest. In fact, you had better finish packing in the morning, as I wouldn't have him kept awake for anything. Good night!"

Distinctly exasperated, Miss Johnstone let the lid of her trunk fall with a vicious thud.

"I believe I'll drop something on the floor every hour during the night. I have to leave early in the morning, but

she is perfectly willing for me to rise at dawn to pack rather than have her son disturbed. It's enough to make him selfish as a pig! And yet, somehow, he isn't selfish at all," she added with quick justice.

Presently a Maréchal Niel rose came through the open window, and another, and another. She leaned over the casement, only to receive a soft pelting of petals from a full-blown one which broke against her hair. She could not see Pelham, but she could hear his laugh. A swift wish to see him, to talk to him, possessed her; and the silent yellow missiles continued to beg her to come to the piazza where they grew, until they prevailed with her.

"Just to stop the slaughter of the innocents," she explained. "The poor, pretty things, to be beheaded so!"

"They died gloriously—they brought you." He caught her hands and led her toward the hammock. "You'll have to share this with me. All the porch chairs are on the front piazza, in requisition for the sewing-circle this afternoon."

"Oh, I can't stay more than just a minute. I'm ashamed to have you see me like this!"

"This" was a wholly delectable *négligée*, in which she looked so girlish and so sweet that Brooke caught his breath. He had not released the protesting hands, and he drew her beside him in the hammock.

"You *must*!" she said.

"I *can't*!" he returned. "The harder I struggle to let them go, the dearer and littler and softer they feel. I want them so! I want you so!"

"I am sorry to disoblige you," Elizabeth was beginning primly, when an ominous call floated on the air.

"Are you on the porch, dearie? I thought I heard the hammock creaking. Don't smoke any longer—tobacco is so bad for your heart!"

They listened with strained ears for the sound of the closing of her door. It did not come, and they finally decided that Mrs. Pelham had purposely left it open to hear when her recreant son went to bed.

"Mercy, how can I get up-stairs?" Elizabeth, perforce, must whisper very close to Brooke's ear. "These high-

heeled slippers make such a clatter! With her door open she will certainly hear that there are two people going up-stairs; and she came to my room and specially asked me not to keep you awake."

"It isn't later than twelve," he whispered consolingly, his lips, in turn, so close to the pretty ear that a tendril of curl brushed them.

"But if your mother sees me in this *négligée* she will think it so—so informal! I *must* get up-stairs; but how can I?"

"I'll show you," he whispered, suddenly rising and picking her up as easily as if she were a child. "I'll be as impersonal as an elevator." Then, from the foot of the stairs, he called out: "Good night, mother! I'm going up now. Pleasant dreams!"

In the deep darkness there stole over the girl a strange new sense of peace, of security, as those strong arms bore her so gently. He paused at her door, delaying the relinquishment of his burden.

"If there was only another flight of stairs!" he groaned.

Judge Alexander had been struck by Brooke Pelham's self-control; but there are limits, when one is young and the month is May, and the girl you love is in your arms—though merely as a matter of convenience.

"Did you fasten the back door?" called an anxious voice. "I'm sure I heard something click!"

"It must have been the opening of the gates of Eden, mother, for I've fastened everything."

There was a ring of boyish gladness in the speaker's voice that made his mother think:

"Already that tonic is doing Brooke good!"

As her son sat by his window, too deeply happy for sleep, he thought of Fanny Grant, of the superficiality and selfishness which he had seen clearly since the glamour of his youthful infatuation had passed.

"If it had not been for mother, we might have been married now," he realized with a shiver of repugnance. "May I never forget that it was because of her that Fanny and I did not make the mistake of our lives!" Then the image of

Elizabeth drove away all disagreeable memories. "And it was through mother that I have had you in my arms to-night, sweetheart!"

## IV

MRS. BROOKE PELHAM seated herself on her favorite south piazza. She caught the sound of a caller's voice in the sitting-room.

"If it's Mary Fenwick, I won't let her know I'm here," she thought, as she settled comfortably in a corner where she could watch the baby-carriage in which her son was taking his midday nap. "Why, she is talking about me! The way of the eavesdropper is hard."

"You don't mean to say that your daughter-in-law puts all the housekeeping on you?"

If Mrs. Pelham caught the implied criticism, there was no trace of it in her tranquil reply.

"Yes—she is so unselfish! She knows I've kept house here so long it would be a trial to me to change my ways, so she has stepped into the place of a real daughter."

"She seems to have an easy time. I heard Fanny Grant Strudwick say that young Mrs. Pelham spent most of her time taking the baby out driving."

"I think the baby's perfect health is due to the fact that Elizabeth keeps him

in the open air almost all day long. Will Strudwick has not been so fortunate as Brooke," returned Mrs. Pelham placidly. "I hope Elizabeth will have increasing leisure as the years go by. She certainly deserves it. 'The sweetest woman that e'er drew breath is my son's wife, Elizabeth.'"

A mist dimmed the eavesdropper's eyes. Before her marriage she had dreaded the prospect of having to burn perpetual incense before Brooke in order to satisfy his mother. And lo, she had found the burner lighted, with a new fire of tenderness, before herself! Brooke's wife was everything which was best in woman—his mother could not imagine him caring for anything less.

The crowning joy of life had come to the elder Mrs. Pelham in the advent of the little boy. She learned that the world is gentle to age; that while it bores the average person to hear a mother talk about her children, it is forgiven—nay, it is even expected—in a grandparent. Outsiders listened sympathetically to the latest developments of the baby's vocabulary; and two eager young people drank in every word, and enthusiastically agreed with her, when she declared her grandson wonderfully good and surpassingly clever.

At last the Worshiper had found an audience!